

Phaedra's suicide note

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A horrific surprise awaits Theseus on his return to Troezen after a visit to the oracle. His wife Phaedra is dead: she has hanged herself. Theseus' reaction is one of utter grief and incomprehension. Seeing his wife's body before him, he cries out in agony: his heart is broken, his house left desolate, his life ended. What could have driven Phaedra to this unforeseen act of self-destruction?

The scenario is from Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus*. We in the audience know, as Theseus does not, that Phaedra has killed herself in order to escape disgrace. Driven insane by illicit passion for her stepson Hippolytus, she confided in the foolish, garrulous old Nurse, who immediately told Hippolytus everything. But the naïve young man, with his horror of sex, responded with a venomous tirade against Phaedra and the whole of womankind. After his outburst, Phaedra could not bear to face her husband again. This was the reason why Phaedra took her own life; but, before leaving the stage for the last time, she vowed that her death would teach Hippolytus a lesson. 'He will learn,' she said, 'that chastity is humility and gentleness.'

At this point we begin to realize the meaning of Phaedra's ominous last words. As Theseus examines her body, he sees something which attracts his attention: 'But look here! What is this, fastened to her hand? – A letter, with a message for me!'

Understanding the prop; unravelling the plot

This small object of the letter repays a closer look. Few props were seen on the 'minimalist' tragic stage, and they were never simply 'there' in the background to create a setting. Where props are used, we need to pay careful attention to them, for they are invariably charged with meaning. The opulent tapestry in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the bow in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Medea's magical chariot, and so on – these physical objects all have a deep significance related to the wider dramatic themes. So it is with Phaedra's letter here. The fact that it is practically the only prop in the play gives it immediate emphasis. It is a very small object – probably not even visible to those in the back rows of the audience – so it cannot be said to add a striking visual dimension to the production. Nevertheless, its effect on the drama is disproportionate to its size.

When Theseus unseals the letter, terrible events – almost literally – unfold. We do not learn the precise wording, but the gist is horribly clear. Instead of the message of love which Theseus hoped to find, the note contains an accusation of rape against Hippolytus. This outrageous lie causes Theseus to curse his son, thus bringing about his death (as predicted by Aphrodite at the beginning of the play).

Letters and literacy

Phaedra's suicide note is instrumental in moving the plot forward, but – more interestingly – it also seems to embody certain central themes of the play. First of all, let us consider its physical appearance, which is described in the text. It is a writing-tablet (the Greek word is *deltos*) made of thin, folded leaves of wood, to which wax was added as a writing surface: the message would be scratched into the wax and the leaves sealed, ready for opening by the recipient. Here Euripides shows Theseus untwisting the threads which fasten together the leaves and breaking the seal, which bears the imprint of Phaedra's

signet ring, in order to read the words inside.

This type of writing-tablet is familiar to historians and archaeologists: it seems to have been in widespread use throughout the classical world. Phaedra's *deltos*, then, might not seem a very remarkable object. But it becomes more interesting when we take into account that the *deltos* was still a comparatively new, exciting and growing phenomenon in Euripides' time. Although we have lead letters from the sixth century and writing-tablets used as letters from around the beginning of the fifth century, letters seem to have made few appearances on the tragic stage before Euripides' play. This may possibly be explained by the fact that, although plays such as the *Hippolytus* were produced in the later fifth century (*Hippolytus* in 428 B.C.), their plots were taken from the myths of the heroic age. To judge by our earliest surviving Greek literature, the Homeric epics, the people of this period were not literate. Bellerophon, in the *Iliad*, delivers 'sinister symbols' in a message to Iobates, but there are no references to reading or writing as such. It is highly unlikely that Phaedra and Theseus would ever really have sent and received letters: so the *deltos* may be an anachronistic detail. (In the same way, Euripides made Bellerophon deliver a letter when he dramatized the Homeric myth in his tragedy *Sthenoboea*.) However, there is a further point that tragic characters, though notionally located in the heroic period, in fact are more free-floating than this, so it might be more accurate to see the letter not so much as a strict anachronism as an object that is simply inappropriate to the world of the tragic stage.

If we want to appreciate the effect, we must imagine something along the lines of a modern-day production of *Hippolytus* in which Phaedra sends Theseus a text-message or e-mail – an everyday form of communication in real life now, but out-of-place in the world of the play, and therefore likely to make an impact on the audience. But (unlike, say, the wrist-watch which Charlton Heston can be observed wearing in several scenes in *Ben-Hur*) this is not a mistake. Euripides knew exactly what he was doing. Here we have a striking instance of his creating a startling juxtaposition by bringing an increasingly everyday object, the letter, into the unusual context of the tragic theatre, but at the same time 'smoothing over the gap' between heroic past and Athenian present through the up-to-date issue of literacy. The tragedians showed an unmistakable *penchant* for 'updating' the heroic myths, using the events of the distant past as a way of addressing the concerns of their own day and age. *Hippolytus* may be based on a hoary old tale, but Euripides is reminding his audience that it is also a contemporary drama, dealing with issues which are full of relevance for their own lives.

Phaedra's letter-writing reflects the fact that the play was produced at a time when literacy was on the increase. Historical evidence is thin on the ground, but it is generally thought that writing, texts and books became widespread only in the fifth century and later. Much of our evidence, indeed, comes from drama: the Athenian dramatists, and Euripides in particular, were clearly fascinated by the increasing use of the written word. One of the earliest and best-known references to books comes in Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs* (405 B.C.), where the god Dionysus talks about reading a text of his favourite play, *Andromeda*—another Euripidean tragedy! And, as we shall see, in *Hippolytus* there are other signs, apart from Phaedra's letter, of this fascination with writing.

‘I hate a clever woman’

This letter, then, is a calculated incongruity. Perhaps even odder is the fact that its author is a woman. We do not know whether male and female levels of literacy were comparable: could women read and write at the time of the play’s production? In another Euripidean tragedy (*Iphigenia among the Taurians*, produced about fifteen years later), Iphigenia wants to send a letter to her brother Orestes; but she has to dictate the letter to a Greek man, rather than writing down the words herself. In contrast, it is clear that Phaedra has written her own suicide note. Furthermore, even the Nurse – who is not only female but also a slave! – is familiar with books. When she attempts to persuade Phaedra that her love is pardonable, she appeals to her knowledge of myth, saying: ‘Those who have old paintings, or spend their time in reading, know that Zeus once fell in love with Semele...’. Does the play represent fifth-century reality? Were women of every social class really literate? – or does Euripides have a more complicated point to make? It is hard to say: the evidence available elsewhere, in literature, art and archaeology, does not suggest any definite answers (but it is still worth posing these questions).

Some critics interpret the play as an exploration of the awful consequences that result when women in a household overstep their normal feminine rôles. Domestic stability has already been shattered by Phaedra’s feelings for her stepson; but her letter-writing may have made her appear even more transgressive in the eyes of an audience who believed that literacy was for men only. The play could be seen as a warning that women become dangerous when they are given power over their own speech. ‘I hate a clever woman, with more wit than becomes a woman!’ Hippolytus yells at the Nurse.

Talking at cross-purposes

But we do not need to read the play in this way. It is not just the female use of language that is problematic. In fact, communication – or the lack of it – is a major theme of the whole play. All the major characters, in one way or another, fail to communicate with one another. Phaedra cannot make the Nurse understand her predicament, and the old woman later grievously miscalculates the effect of her words on Hippolytus; Phaedra and Hippolytus never exchange a word directly, even when they are on stage together; Hippolytus and Theseus misunderstand each other so totally that they might as well be speaking different languages; and we never see Phaedra talking to her husband – except posthumously, through her suicide note.

Let us look again at this letter, and at Theseus’ reaction when he reads it. His choice of words is unusual: he says that the letter is *shrieking*; that it *howls* out unbearable horrors. This image – of a silent, inanimate object uttering words aloud – is extremely striking. Similar imagery is used elsewhere in the play: Theseus describes Phaedra’s voiceless corpse as ‘blazing forth’ evidence of his son’s guilt, and later on Hippolytus wishes that the walls of the house could cry out in his defence. As far as this dysfunctional family is concerned, written words and mute objects are more eloquent than genuine, face-to-face communication.

In this respect, we might recall another point in the play where writing is mentioned. When Theseus accuses him of rape, Hippolytus replies that he knows nothing of sex except what he has seen written down. Here (as often) it is difficult to translate the Greek: the word which Hippolytus uses, *graphai*, can refer either to words in books or depictions in art. But it is clear that, for Hippolytus, written words or images have taken the place of real human relationships; and, once again, they prove to be an unsatisfactory substitute, with disastrous consequences.

Proof through permanence

The tragedians, and Euripides in particular, were fascinated by letters and literacy; but fascination with innovations is often tempered with suspicion. In the end, *Hippolytus* questions the value of the written word. Is Phaedra’s letter really *proof* of anything? So Theseus believes: ‘this letter is a clear, convincing charge,’ he tells Hippolytus in the face of his denial. But his servant, a little later, is right to be sceptical: he would not believe in Hippolytus’ guilt, he says, even if all the wood on Mount Ida were made into defamatory writing-tablets! This debate, with its legalistic terminology, makes us think of the Athenian lawcourts, where letters were starting to be used – rightly or wrongly – as legal evidence of guilt or innocence. Contemporary philosophers and rhetoricians (Gorgias, Democritus, Plato and others) can be seen to share this scepticism. These intellectuals argued that one should not equate ‘writing’ with ‘truth’. Written words, perhaps because of their ‘permanence’ or the difficulty and expense of writing things down, may *seem* more authoritative or truthful than their spoken counterparts, but they can in fact be deceptive, dangerous and misleading.

Phaedra’s suicide note, then, can make us contemplate many significant issues, including stagecraft, literacy, gender, poetic imagery and ancient thought. Of course, we have not exhausted the play’s possibilities, but (as is so often the case) what may seem to be a small detail suggests new ways of looking at the drama and the society which produced it: and it is at this point that the drama starts to come alive.

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